

# **Cultural Economies of Hard Rubbish**

Prepared for:

**Moreland City Council**

***March 2014***

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# Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>BACKGROUND .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>RESULTS .....</b>	<b>8</b>
4.1	MEANINGS, BUNDLES, AND CONTRADICTIONS .....	8
4.2	HARD RUBBISH REGULATIONS.....	12
<b>5</b>	<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>15</b>

## Executive summary

Previous research in Melbourne has suggested that informal practices of hard rubbish reuse (or 'gleaning') by households may significantly decrease the amount of landfill (Lane et al. 2009; Lane 2011). Despite this, many municipal councils throughout Melbourne have sought to make gleaning illegal. Those councils, such as Moreland, that have supported personal gleaning, have expressed concerns around managing issues of dumping and 'professional' gleaning. This qualitative study of 15 households in the Moreland Council region aimed to provide more in-depth knowledge of why and how people glean. Building on previous work on the political economy of hard rubbish, we saw a need for a more culturally-inflected understanding of this lifestyle practice in relation to wider consumption practices, cultural perspectives on commodities, and perceived changing norms and values around responsibility and ownership, 'waste' and value, and environmental or ethical consumption (Lewis and Potter 2011). By providing a more complex understanding of the culture and practices of gleaning our concern has been to locate the potential 'place' and role of gleaning activities, particularly for domestic reuse, within councils and communities and indicate the social, economic, and other implications and potential limitations of current strategies and policies to manage and control hard rubbish reuse. The study reveals the practice of gleaning as characterised by, and as allowing, the expression of positive values associated with not-wasting, caring for others, and social responsibility. What the study found was that it fosters a sense of connection across generations and with the wider community. Interviewees associated the opposite values of wastefulness, selfishness, and social isolation with mainstream consumerism; gleaning is explicitly characterised by study participants as an active and performative rejection of this. The report concludes, in light of these study findings, with a list of recommendations for Moreland City Council.

# 1 Introduction

In October 2011, RMIT's School of Media and Communication, in collaboration with Swinburne University of Technology's Institute for Social Research, was granted permission by Moreland City Council to undertake a qualitative study into the recycling and reuse of kerbside hard rubbish within the local government area.

Council had identified problems of increased operating costs associated with organised scavenging for economic gain and desired to gain a better understanding, both of the amounts of materials involved in gleaning activities and the motivations of gleaners. This understanding would then inform future Council strategies and policies regarding kerbside hard rubbish. At the same time, RMIT and Swinburne researchers had observed an increase in kerbside hard rubbish gleaning across Melbourne more broadly and, building on previous work on the political economy of hard rubbish, saw a need for a more culturally-inflected understanding of this practice in relation to wider consumption practices, cultural perspectives on commodities, and changing meanings particularly around responsibility and ownership, 'waste' and value, and environmental or ethical consumption (Lewis and Potter 2011). This level of understanding would help locate the potential 'place' and role of gleaning activities, particularly for domestic reuse, *within* communities and indicate likely social, economic, and other implications of potential strategies and policies to manage/control them.

The project commenced in February 2012 with the support of Moreland City Council. Over the next 11 months, RMIT and Swinburne researchers conducted qualitative interviews and video ethnographies with 15 households in the local government area of Moreland City Council. Meetings were also held with Council's waste management staff to clarify existing policies and procedures relating to hard rubbish.

This report presents a summary of the outcomes of this research and aims to provide empirically based insights into the cultural economy of kerbside hard rubbish gleaning to inform future strategy and policy decisions regarding hard rubbish by Moreland City Council.

## 2 Background

According to Moreland City Council's Waste and Litter Strategy 2007-2012, 60% of households in the local government area put out 2156 tonnes of hard rubbish for collection in 2004-05. Of this, 739 tonnes was recycled. As there has been no research into the total amount of hard rubbish involved in gleaning activities it is assumed that this figure refers to hard rubbish that has been recycled by Council contractors. The Waste and Litter Strategy notes an overall increasing trend in total waste generated within the local government area (LGA) per annum (landfilled plus diverted waste).

It is possible, and indeed highly likely, that the figures for both the amount of hard rubbish put out for collection, and the amount recycled, are much higher once the activities of community gleaners are included. In her survey of 306 households in Melbourne's south east, Ruth Lane found that 35-40% of respondents had gleaned items from hard rubbish for household reuse (Lane et al. 2009; Lane 2011). In effect, gleaners operate within a cultural economy that sits outside standard Council performance measures and which has the further potential to be formally built on and leveraged to assist Council in fulfilling their existing goals and strategies around waste management, minimisation and reuse. For example, the third goal in the Moreland Council's Waste and Litter Strategy is to "Provide increased opportunities for reuse within the municipality", with a focus on the establishment of a hard waste reuse centre. The five-year strategy to 2013 also includes the following goals:

- Reduce the tonnage of waste to landfill
- Increase the level of recycling of all materials
- Increase the level of diversion of all material from landfill
- Promote minimisation concept – reduction and reuse

While gleaning can be viewed positively in these terms, and indeed is by many, it also presents challenges for Council in terms of lost revenue to contractors, both due to informal gleaning practices and to 'professional' gleaners who glean for economic gain. Council also receives complaints from some members of the community about the perceived mess that hard rubbish creates in their neighbourhoods, as well as concerns about people loitering and picking through 'their belongings'. Moreland City Council has noted particularly the impact of scrap metal scavenging on increased costs of service provision, problems with the dumping of mattresses and e-waste in hard rubbish<sup>1</sup>, and illegal dumping (i.e. outside of official collection dates). Council has also observed that more effective advertising of hard rubbish collection days also impacts negatively on their costs (as more people can then prepare for a gleaning 'expedition' thus reducing the amount available for contractors).

Furthermore, existing laws around gleaning appear, at least to members of the public, to be vague and inconsistently enforced. Each Victorian LGA views and polices gleaning slightly differently. In Moreland City Council, and some other municipalities, gleaning for economic gain is illegal and offenders can be prosecuted. However, charities can obtain permission to take items before the official collection dates. Gleaning for personal, domestic reuse is allowed by some councils, including Moreland City Council, but considered an offense in others. Even if a council does not consider it an offense, local police, unsure as to the ownership status of hard rubbish items, can take it upon themselves to arrest someone for 'stealing', as a Lilydale man discovered in 2011 on attempting to glean a vacuum cleaner. This incident served to highlight the high level of public sentiment that exists regarding gleaning which was defended as a 'great Aussie tradition' and one that helped reduce carbon emissions.

The outcomes of gleaning would appear to contribute directly to Council's goals and align with community/national concerns regarding waste minimisation, recycling, and reuse. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> Following a two-week trial in 2010, Council has now implemented programs to deal specifically with mattresses and e-waste. Mattresses go to 'Dream Safe' for 're-birth' or recycling.

benefits of the actual practice of gleaning and all that comes with it are less clear as the associated costs—financial, social, or others—to councils and members of the community have to be considered.

Councils already have a fair idea of the financial costs of gleaning, if only based on the relative decrease in revenue from contractors. However, the social/cultural costs and benefits of gleaning to Australian communities are not well understood and have not, to our knowledge, been investigated. In addition to the contested regimes of value and ownership that are often foregrounded by kerbside hard rubbish, gleaning makes visible certain household practices and economies around thrift and reuse that appear to represent ‘alternatives’ to conventional forms of consumption and goods exchange. These regimes and practices are about more than the single act of disposal or gleaning. They are potentially an expression of, and container for, broader social and cultural values, and thus their regulation or removal could have wide reaching consequences for the community beyond the simple mechanisms of hard rubbish disposal and collection.

In the following sections we first describe how we approached the research and present a summary of our findings, particularly regarding people’s beliefs and motivations in relation to recycling and reuse of hard rubbish. This is followed by a more critical analysis of the findings in relation to the role and function of recycling/reuse, and finally we provide some recommendations for how these findings might inform and be integrated into Council’s future waste strategies and policies.

### 3 Methodology

Householders were recruited via an advertisement on the Facebook Hard Rubbish Group site (a demographically diverse group); advertisements and flyers at the Brunswick and Coburg Community and Neighbourhood Houses; engaging informally with organisers and participants of various social activities at the Community and Neighbourhood Houses (e.g. child care, quilting, dancing, book clubs, etc.); and indirect networking via RMIT researchers' community contacts (e.g. Melbourne PermaBlitz network). For this small-scale, geographically bounded study, it was determined that 15 households would provide sufficient in-depth data to reach 'saturation', or the point at which no significant new findings would be uncovered (Glaser & Strauss 1999). Among the 15 households, the researchers aimed to balance diversity of participants in relation to socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and age.

The research method involved both interviewing householders and, with their consent, video-recording them and their objects as they took us on a tour of the reused hard rubbish goods in their homes and gardens – an approach Pink describes as 'walking with video' (Pink, 2007) and that Lewis sees as enabling researchers to more actively participate in and support the transformational lifestyle practices they are researching (Lewis forthcoming 2014). The merit of this approach is that it provides crucial baseline data on these domestic objects, explaining 'something of their origins, purposes, usefulness (or lack thereof), their "character", their principal users, and their rationale for their location in the home' (Wilken, Arnold & Nansen, 2011, p. 5.3). In most households this tour ended up involving a broader discussion of and engagement with all of their goods, which were often a blend of hard rubbish 'finds', second hand purchases, inherited items, and new purchases. Each interview/'walking with video' tour took between one and two hours and was conducted at a time to suit the householder and their family/co-habitants. Before the interview, participants were provided with a Plain Language Statement which explained the nature and purpose of the research, how their data would be used and stored, an assurance of confidentiality, and that they were free to withdraw their data from the research at any time. All participants received a \$50 voucher to thank them for their time.

Recorded data was encoded, reviewed, and analysed with a focus on participants' beliefs and motivations in relation to: 1) recycling and reusing household goods; 2) the histories of the actual recycled goods they owned; 3) how they used the recycled goods in their homes; and, 4) their everyday household practices. Although there are likely potential connections between social identity, practises and beliefs around reuse and recycling, cross-referencing data in relation to participants' socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, and age was not a focus of this analysis given the small size and ethnographic focus of the study.



## 4 Results

A total of 19 householders were interviewed at 15 households located in the suburbs of Brunswick and Coburg between March and June 2012. Participants ranged widely in terms of age, socio-economic status, and household type and size, though the majority (14) of the household informants were women.

### 4.1 Meanings, bundles, and contradictions

An overall reading of the data indicates that participants associate hard rubbish gleaning with a range of meanings including: creativity, fun, therapy, fashion, waste minimisation, recycling and repurposing, and lifestyle. The act of gleaning may incorporate one or more of these meanings and different combinations depending on the gleaner, the item being gleaned, the context for the gleaning, and other factors.

In addition to the range of meanings, the gleaners we interviewed are typically involved in other practices that similarly sit apart from the mainstream economy and that, along with gleaning, could be regarded as forming assemblages or ‘bundles’ of inter-related ‘alternative’ practices. These alternative practices include: community activism, involvement in LETS (local exchange tradition system) schemes, productive gardening/food growing, keeping backyard chickens, dumpster diving, op-shopping, DIY/repurposing, low energy living, water conservation, alternative transport, and volunteer and/or community work.

The data also show that participants are aware that their motivations and/or practices around gleaning can sometimes contradict the values they hold around these other practices. For example:

- The thrift associated with gleaning contrasts with a willingness to pay more for quality/durable/organic or local products.
- Dumpster diving can conflict with organic, vegetarian, and/or vegan principles.
- An aesthetic sensibility can conflict with the utilitarian non-waster.
- Anti-consumerist beliefs conflict with the search for/acquisition of desirable or ‘trendy’ hard rubbish items
- Long distance travel for gleaning trips conflicts with low energy principles.

In order to unpack these initial findings, we will focus on each in turn—meanings, bundles and contradictions—drawing on the data to reveal something of the role of hard rubbish in the community and the implications of gleaning practices, both positive and negative.

#### 4.1.1 The role of hard rubbish - gleaners’ perspectives

The following sections describe in turn the key findings relating to meanings associated with gleaning practices, related practices or bundles, and apparent contradictions in meanings between practices and/or practitioners.

##### Intergenerational values

All interviewees could be regarded as long-term gleaners. They typically did not identify a specific time when they started actively gleaning, but rather located it somewhere in an historical continuum that included remembered childhood practices, such as visiting tips, op shops, and having repurposed clothes or toys.

*"My dad was a bit famous for going to the tip and coming home with more than he went with." (P10)*

*"I remember getting toys from op-shops if we were on holiday or something; mum would take us to the op-shop and buy us toys." (P3a)*

*"So I always came back with broken dolls and all this sort of stuff, like all through my childhood that's what we did." (P13)*

References were commonly made to the more difficult economic times their parents grew up in and how this was the likely reason for their parents 'make do', thrifty approach to resources including clothing, furniture and food, an ethos that was often seen as a major influence for participants in shaping their own present-day gleaning habits.

*"Well my mother grew up in that sort of depression attitude and was very good at scrimping and saving." (P5b)*

*"More saving things, because he grew up – he's a son of Italian migrants who went through the depression and the war, so he grew up with that ethos very strongly." (P8)*

*"So he's just a tinkering type person. But so there's this background of that sort of secondhand-y type things. Things should be repaired, not thrown away." (P10)*

Often these skills are still drawn on as parents continue to be valued sources both of gleaned and second-hand items and of certain DIY and craft skills needed to repair or repurpose these and other items for their now adult children. Interviewees exhibit a degree of pride in their parents' skills, and items that were made from scratch, repaired, or repurposed by their parents feature prominently in the house tours, usually with an accompanying story of how or why they came about.

*"Dad used to work at Tubemakers...and they renovated all of that and all the old factory floor clocks were all gotten rid of and so Dad used to find them in the skips and he'd take them home and restore them. So they've got a massive one that's sort of half the size of that window at their house. It's from the old factory floor, so all of us have got a factory floor clock." (P1b)*

*"My dad, I'll put this light on, so my dad made this; there's one here and there's one at the backdoor because we just needed something to get a bit organised by the front door." (P4)*

*"So that little cupboard there, that was an old record playing cabinet or something, and that had all been falling apart, but the nice curved wood on the sides, that was there, so mum found other bits of wood to fix it up and polish it back." (P9)*

These gleaners' parents seem to have played especially significant roles in shaping their children's current attitudes and expertise around hard rubbish and second-hand items. Most of those interviewed exhibited a range of DIY, craft, and creative skills, and the willingness to tackle all kinds of projects, with the only significant deterrent being time. Items that interviewees had already repaired, repurposed, or created from salvaged materials featured prominently in all the house tours.

*"And I sanded, all in good time, do you know what I mean, so that thing was full of borer and I just liked the piece so I pulled it to bits and restored it just because I like doing that stuff. Everything is second hand. That bookshelf, I made it from scratch, so this here, you know, was being chucked out and I just redid it." (P11)*

*"That seat over there, the legs of it were the feet of a laundry trough that used to be in our previous laundry which was demolished a long time ago and the top is actually fence posts from the old fence that was demolished about 15 years ago." (P3b)*

*"I found this frame and bits on the side of the road and spent about 100 bucks on it using recycled bits that I had and now I'm giving that to a friend." (P6)*

There are also indications that these inherited attitude and skills are in turn being passed on to the next generation. Interviewees with children discussed involving them in their gleaning and second-hand practices. Although initially motivated by thrift or anti-consumerist values (particularly around short-lived and disposable clothes and toys for children), these parents are often also aware that they prefer to demonstrate these values to their children with the hope that they learn a way of living that is 'alternative' to the mainstream.

*"And also part of that self-sustainability is that I want my kids to learn about it. (P1b) ... So it's hard to combat what they get elsewhere in terms of having the newest things." (P1a)*

*"I'm really trying to bring him up to understand. I say to him, 'That was good. We went to that garage sale and we got that for \$2. That's normally \$20. That's \$18, we can spend that on something else now.' I think he's starting to get that. He gets his pocket money, so he's starting to value – just understand. It just means you can spend your money on something else." (P8)*

More constraint-oriented motivations around gleaning reveal that it offers a much appreciated opportunity to save money on items of basic necessity in situations where immediate function trumps aesthetics and longevity is a lower priority. This is often associated with a first home/rental, student days, and difficult periods in the interviewees' lives.

*"... because we'd moved down from NSW so we were probably kind of collecting stuff for you know, a new house in the first place." (P1a)*

*"I suppose, maybe because I'm a bit older, I'm not setting up a house for the first time and I don't really want the sofa with the rip in it anymore." (P8)*

*"We were both in the arts and there's no money in the arts at all." (P11)*

*"Oh yeah, a couple of times in my life when things weren't going well, it was definitely a fix ... and also the necessity, it was a really run-down place, so it was all we could afford. There were three of us living there very cheaply for rent." (P12)*

In one instance, gleaning activities were credited with helping to alleviate anxiety and phobic issues, as well as helping to deal with economic stress.

### **Broader values and practice 'bundles'**

While many of the people in the study had moved beyond those periods where thrift was more of a necessity than a choice, their practices around gleaning and second-hand items did not seem to change significantly. Instead, motivations are described differently, and are related to a general ethos of not wasting, as well as to broader social and political values.

*"... there's also a bit of an ethos of you know not wasting things and that kind of thing I guess. I just, I hate the thought of wasting all that money, and wasting all that stuff that's been manufactured and turned into rubbish, I mean it's not rubbish." (P1a)*

*"I just think it's trying to live a life that's more ethical and environmentally sustainable, and why make, when you can reuse things?" (P2)*

*"Well, you know, we don't like paying for things and contributing to a consumer culture." (P6)*

*"Well, it's just the obvious really, that it's just reusing resources that would otherwise go to the tip... I'm from that round of environmentalism and I've always had an environmental conscience from probably when I was about 15 or something. So that's just been a strand right through my life really, the whole – all of the different aspects of environmentalism and conservation." (P8)*

*"I've always had an interest in social justice, not just environmental issues, and I think I just hate the idea of spending large amounts of money on things, when other people have so little. So it's a combo of environmental and social, because I think things shouldn't go to landfill, partly because that's bad for the environment. But I also think things shouldn't go to landfill because I think our society is just, I don't know, I guess it's unethical for people to be just upgrading for the sake of the latest fashion, when there are so many people that are doing without. I would rather be able to donate to those charities that help, rather than just earning money in order to buy new things." (P9)*

These broader social and political values find expression not just through gleaning but also through a range of other activities that the gleaners we interviewed tend to also be involved in. These include, most commonly, saving energy and/or water (8 households), growing their own food (7 households), sustainable transport (7 households), and volunteer or community work (5 households).

Gleaning is clearly very closely associated with participants' understandings of their values – both more personal values to do with their immediate family and also (related) broader values associated with their sense of social and political responsibility. The capacity to express these values through

gleaning generates positive feelings for the interviewees and contributes to a sense that they are being active in creating the kind of community they want to live in.

*"But I do really enjoy the fact of that kind of community sharing that goes on, like the, you know, pointing out that there's hard rubbish. Hey you might be interested there's stuff over here, I really like – I think that there's quite a lack of community and I just find it [sharing hard rubbish] very selfless." (P13)*

*"I had about four friends around us and I'd deposit things on their doors and that was really great. I really enjoyed that but we don't really have people around here that we know so much, except for the people that live in this building and we pass on stuff to them. I really enjoyed, as I said, the three or four households that I'd deposit things on the way home." (P6)*

*"In the community, yes, like anything, meeting things and people exchanging with other people, there's too much in the city of people that are isolated because they don't know how to expand their knowing [community] of people, their networks." (P7)*

In the above passages, gleaning is associated with caring, selflessness, community responsibility, and creativity. There is also a sense that its practice makes gleaners part of a broader community of people who participate in a range of practices that are similarly associated with these values, such as volunteering, community activism, growing food, sustainable transport, and saving water and energy. Members of the 'community' can often recognise one another, or at least those 'not like us', by outward appearances or behaviours that signal their likely persuasion. Those 'not like us' tend to be characterised as uncaring, selfish, and caught up in what are perceived as negative consumerist values.

*"They drive very expensive four-wheel drives, they have lots of, I mean it's really buying into stereotypes and they're all very nice people when you talk to them but, you know, I ... just have issues with that consumption mentality." (P1a)*

*"I guess my immediate friends and that are all very similar to me. A lot of vegetarian friends, a lot of people reusing things, a lot of people who are sewing and things, who I can learn from. A lot of people living in smaller flats, because a lot of my friends have also bought in Brunswick, but they tend to buy flats. I'm not surrounded by people, like everyone thinks my house is a big house, so it's good I'm not surrounded a lot by people who have giant houses." (P9)*

*"This lady up the road, she just bought a house and renovated it and she's very groomed and I can't actually imagine her grabbing stuff from the side of the road but their renovation was a bit like "The Block" renovations. It was like everything just went out ... everything just went into the skip bin and it was heartbreaking..." (P3b)*

### Contradictions and trade-offs

Although not a key feature of our findings, the occasional contradictions that revealed themselves when values associated with different practices clashed are of interest in terms of demonstrating the high level of awareness and reflexivity of these gleaners, and their often active efforts to self-regulate and reconcile any sense of inconsistency in their lifestyles and values. This tension between different value systems and approaches can happen among one person's practices or between people's practices, especially couples, and this was sometimes identified as a source of potential conflict or disagreement that had to be negotiated.

One of the key paradoxes that people signposted was the tendency to 'over-collect' or even hoard hard rubbish items, a tendency aligned closely with the very consumerist values of accumulation which gleaning is supposed to reject.

*"Because I think some people get a bit addicted to the adrenalin and they just like that moment of finding the thing, but they don't know what to do with it, and they just put it somewhere. So it's sort of like the moment's more important than the actual thing, and then it just sits there and it accumulates, so I've reduced my collection over time." (P13)*

*"... because otherwise the danger is you go yeah we'll have that, and you get a whole lot of crap, which we've got enough of that." (P2)*

*"So sometimes there's a bit of a tussle about – internally and also with my partner – about do we actually need the thing, or are we just collecting for the sake of collecting?" (P8)*

Other inconsistencies gleaners highlighted occurred around practices of transport, food, and buying certain new items for reasons of aesthetics, function, and/or cleanliness.

*"The more and more I think ideas of sustainability and impact, the more I just want to either turn my car – what is it? Magna wagon thing into an informal kind of car share with some friends or get rid of it all together but I think it'd be more beneficial to turn it into an informal kind of car share thing because we don't use it very much and we'd like others to have access to it." (P6)*

*"We don't buy organic food and I wouldn't mind buying organic food actually, but I think there would be an argument about that, because it is significantly more expensive... he would probably prefer, I think, that I did a few more things in thrifty ways." (P8)*

*"I also buy art, like I don't find everything so I do invest in art, and yeah, sort of wanting to create a home that reflected me, so that's sort of what I did." (P13)*

The practice of gleaning is best summarised, based on these interviews, as allowing the expression of positive values associated with not-wasting, caring for others, and social responsibility. It fosters a sense of connection between generations and with the wider community. Interviewees associate the opposite values of wastefulness, selfishness, and social isolation with mainstream consumerism; gleaning is explicitly characterised as an active and performative rejection of this.

## 4.2 Hard rubbish regulations

With increasing costs of council service provision over time, and the added value now attached to second-hand goods, there is an incentive for councils to more closely regulate hard rubbish collection and gleaning activities. However, tighter regulation may come at a social cost, both for council and the community. The attitudes of those gleaners we interviewed to the regulation of gleaning practices may contribute valuable insights to this issue.

All of the interviewees are themselves gleaners and naturally regarded gleaning for personal use as a good thing and akin to participating in a public good.

*"... either they're putting them out to share, or they're putting them out because they don't want them in their environment, then I don't see that there's any problem with someone else who thinks they might be able to make use of it picking it up ... I love hard rubbish. It just makes me feel so virtuous when it's gone." (P10)*

*"... it's a fantastic way of recycling, and also keeping culturally interesting items within the area possibly." (P13)*

Most of the interviewees are also aware of varying laws around gleaning, and that gleaning for economic gain by professional gleaners, or 'scavengers' as they are negatively termed, is discouraged if not considered illegal by some councils. Nonetheless, most of those interviewed did not have any problem with professional gleaning and saw it as contributing to the overall goal of having less waste going to landfill.

*"... and there are people who are basically dealers and that's what they do, but I don't really even have a problem with that..." (P13)*

*"It's fine, yeah of course...I mean if he's going to make money out of it then it's more likely it's going to be recycled... if someone is going to collect it and sell it in trash and treasure, it's more likely to be reused actively. I don't see what the problems are." (P5b)*

*"I know that dealers come around with their trucks and take things I've seen them, I think that's better than nothing because things get re-used and if somebody makes some money out of it and dealing is not an easy thing to be doing, it's crappy stuff, but I've got no hassles about that at all and people exchange things." (P7)*

Only one interviewee admitted they had a "little bit of an issue" (P11) with professional gleaning as they believed it disadvantaged those hired by councils to collect it. However, other interviewees exhibited distrust regarding contractors hired by councils in terms of what actually happened to the hard rubbish once collected. Having witnessed contractors' trucks destroy reusable hard rubbish items, they tended to be more supportive of professional gleaners because they were seen to be more actively recycling the items than the contractors.

*"... it was really frustrating because I knew that the truck would come and take them away and landfill them ... I actually just watched the truck crunch them up." (P3a)*

*"...[a friend] was dropping her kids at school and ... there were bikes and piles and piles of kids books and she tried to go back to get it after she'd dropped her kids off but just as she got there she could see the dumper crunching these really good quality bikes and she was almost in tears to see the waste..." (P3a)*

*"I'm very dubious about those people who collect it though. I'm dubious about what they're really doing with it... I've seen those trucks come around they're all just getting chucked in there... So it's obviously not going to be reused." (P5b)*

The move made by some councils towards appointment-based pick-ups tended also to be viewed negatively. The consensus here seemed to be that removing the opportunity for items to be viewed and collected by more people over a longer period of time also removes the sense of sharing and recycling items within the community that was one of the key positive motivations behind gleaning.

*"... they don't have a hard rubbish day, they ring up the council when they've got stuff for them to put out which means that other people can't come and get it. If it's a hard rubbish day you get the cruisers coming and picking stuff up; if it's one person putting stuff out it's going to go [to the contractor]." (P3a)*

*"... the whole swapping thing doesn't happen, you don't get to get what your neighbour doesn't want but you do." (P7)*

Regulations around hard rubbish are thus generally considered unnecessary by the interviewees—an interference into something that has been “a tradition since the days of the depression.” (P7)

*"I don't understand why people get so uptight about it really." (P5b)*

When it gets to the stage of fines, however, one interviewee was particularly outraged at the perceived trespass this represented, hinting at notions of civil liberty.

*"I've heard about a number of councils that are cracking down and fining people for interfering with the rubbish that's put out which absolutely horrified me, I thought how ridiculous can you get, I mean this is sort of getting down to such – interference." (P7)*

While some regulation around gleaning seems to be tolerated among those we interviewed, when it starts to infringe on gleaners' capacities to express those positive values they associate with it, such as sharing, recycling, not wasting, and community engagement, it is viewed harshly. Such regulations can create a sense of separation and resistance between 'us' and 'them' where previously, with minimal regulation, there is a sense of gleaners being on the same page as councils and contributing in their way to reducing waste to landfill.



## 5 Conclusion

Based on the findings of this small-scale qualitative study, it appears that gleaning is a deeply embedded, multi-generational practice in Australian culture. Those we interviewed are very fond of the practice itself, the way it recruits family, friends, and neighbours, the expression and sharing of DIY and creative skills that it often involves, and of the associated items themselves that occupy very prominent places throughout interviewees' homes, as well as in their personal histories as they remember the time, circumstances, and people that came together for each item.

Furthermore, gleaning hard rubbish is about recycling and reducing waste and those who actively participate in it tend to recycle, reduce waste, and 'contribute' socially and politically in other ways, through food, community work, sustainable modes of transport, and other ways that sit apart from the mainstream economy. Gleaning provides socially and politically aware people with another outlet for the expression of their values, and a way for them to feel valued and connected as a community. These are attributes that councils seek to achieve in creating engaged and active communities and they therefore should be fostered at every opportunity.

We would suggest that Moreland City Council consider the implications of these findings for future policy, planning, and decisions involving the regulation of hard rubbish. Given the range of positive social and community outcomes provided by gleaning, we would also suggest that the impact of any policy changes be closely monitored and evaluated.

Our recommendations to Council coming out of this study include:

- **The need for waste-management policies that enable rather than restrict the active involvement of citizens in hard rubbish reuse practises, and that these policies reflect the social and environmental values held by ratepayers.**
- **Developing campaigns for encouraging positive forms of hard rubbish sharing and reuse such as council-led 'market' days in public parks where residents can share hard rubbish items.**
- **Clarifying the legal status of gleaning in ways that encourage a positive culture of hard rubbish sharing and reuse and that support the efforts of ordinary citizens to engage with household and neighbourhood-based sustainability practises.**
- **Encouraging hard rubbish 'swapping' days at Schools to educate children about the benefits of reuse and recycling and to encourage more considered approaches to consumption.**
- **Providing neighbourhood depots for the storage, sharing, and repair of hard rubbish given that space limitations was a key concern for many hard rubbish reusers.**
- **Revisiting contractor pick-up arrangements to ensure that hard rubbish items are sorted appropriately during collection and recycled where possible rather than simply compacted and added to landfill.**

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